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ABSTRACT

In the context of striving for an effective educational equity agenda and school community commitment to diversity, this action research study sought to determine when and how teachers' attitudes, values and self-awareness should be evaluated, and how knowledge of their misconceptions could be used to enhance the success of students attending urban high schools. At a high school in the Indianapolis Public School Corporation serving 1052 ethnically diverse students, faculty were asked to think about each of their present students with regard to two attributes: general academic ability and learning personality. They then considered 29 instructional alternatives and chose which would be appropriate for each student. These choices were then compared with an expert's instructional choice. Participants then responded to items contained in "critical conversations" task sheets on equalizing educational opportunities, participated in various staff development activities, and were pre- and post-tested to determine whether their opinions had changed. The study concluded that urban practitioners believe that different instructional alternatives work best for different learners; that degree and direction of change are influenced by the practitioner's own cognitive ability, learning personality, and prior knowledge; and that by uncovering practitioners' perspectives on contemporary issues change agents can better gauge when and how to replay those choices. (JB)

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acticing What We Preach: New Roles For Professional Educators

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Practicing What We Preach: New Roles for Professional Educators

Despite the past decades' flood of commission reports, foundation grants, new pedagogies, curricular innovations and shelves of research, schooling in urban communities remains in a rut. It is, as ever, a terrific experience for some students, a failure for many others, and not much of a dent on the large group in the middle. A change - researchers have cautioned, existing institutional structures and practices cannot be reformed, they must be transformed. This transformation requires infusing an empirically-based opportunity to learn orientation into deliberations designed to create and advance an effective equity agenda. The effective equity agenda is one that can be used as a benchmark for assessing a school's existing and future programs and practices which reflect the schools community's commitment to accepting, understanding and celebrating diversity.

While considering the proposition that the urban practitioners' voices reenter deliberations regarding standard-based reform, several fundamental questions emerged. First, why should change agents want to seek out and listen to urban practitioners? What could those voices tell us about equalizing educational opportunity? Second, how do change agents go about "hearing" those voices and subsequently replaying them for the practitioners and to other stakeholders (i.e. the media, parents, politicians, and taxpayers).

The primary objective of this research project was to address the latter question. Specifically the researcher sought to answer to the following questions: 1) when and how should practitioners' attitudes, values, and self awareness be evaluated; and, 2) how can knowledge of practitioner's misconceptions be used to enhance the success of students attending urban high schools.

Research Methodology.

The specific methodology used in this investigation is best described as action research. Action

research refers to the practical application of the scientific method or other forms of disciplined inquiry to the process of dealing with real world problems. The process of action research has five sequential steps: 1) problem formulation; 2) data collection; 3) data analysis; 4) reporting of results, and 5) action planning.

The data source for this investigation was the professional staff from an urban school selected as an ISU Professional Development School site in January 1995. This school is one of seven high schools in the Indianapolis Public School Corporation. The student body is comprised of 1042 students, of which 67% are African American; 30% Caucasian; .1.7%, Spanish; .9%, Asian; and .5%, American Indians. The faculty is 51% male and 49% female. Of these, 33% are Caucasian males and 27% are Caucasian females; 17% are African American males and 22% are African American females. Sixty-six percent of the faculty have earned Master's degrees and the average number of years of experience is 18.8. The researchers' field notes, a questionnaire, interviews, and the school's Indiana 2000 application were analyzed to determine what similarities and differences regarding initiatives that should be implemented exists between and among the faculty and the administration.

What follows is a summary of the **process** the researcher used 1) to discover the would-be collaborators' opinions about effective pedagogical practices; 2) to compare their opinions with existing evidence and expert opinion; 3) to discover participant's misconceptions; and 4) to select the issues to examine in detail in the future.

First, the participants were asked to think about each of their present students with regard to two attributes: general academic ability and learning personality (figure one). Then, the participants were asked to sort twenty-nine prominent instructional alternatives. (denoted on graphic entitled "Wheel of Instructional Alternatives"). According to the four types of students denoted on the graphic entitled "Who

Are Our Students". This activity was used to discover what urban practitioners think are the best instructional alternatives they can use with different kinds of students. It also provided an opportunity for participants: 1) to experience the qualities of critical conversations, 2) to become consciously aware of their own learning personality and biases, and 3) to pay attention to the sociopolitical factors that influence their own and others' propensity for change.

The would-be collaborator's opinions about "the best" instructional strategies to use with different kinds of students were compared with expert opinion. The results are presented in Table One. The numbers in the parentheses reflect the extent to which the urban practitioners agree with "expert opinion."

Table One

WHO ARE OUR STUDENTS?

	Conforming	Independent
High Ability	Direct Instruction (6) Discussion (20) Field Observations (5) Mastery Learning (15) Oral Reports (23) STAD-Cooperative Learning (12)	Brain Storming (24) Cases (10) Debates (22) Problem Solving (22) Simulation (9)
Low Ability	Academic Games (17) Demonstrations (13) Drill & Practice (33) Individualized Instruction (7) Learning Modules (14) Presentations (22) Computer Assisted Instruction (1) Recitation (23) Tutoring (8)	Centers of Interest (18) Contracts (12) Discovery (12) Role Playing (7) Simulation Games (14) N = 40

Then, the researchers prepared task sheets reflecting expert opinion on a variety of issues and images relating to equalizing educational opportunities (See figure three). Participants responded to this assessment by indicating their agreement or disagreement with each particular statement.

Next, in order to determine whether and how the would-be collaborators' opinions **changed** over time, the "critical conversations" task sheet was used as a pre-and post assessment device. The scores on both the pretest and the post test treated as interval data, e.g. the researcher assumed that the differences between the scores really mean equal differences in the respondents opinions about equity-related issues. Table Two reflects how many of the participants' opinions were moderated as result of their participation in a variety of staff development activities which focused on creating a partnership/performance agreement that goes beyond the formality of the words toward a collective vision of culturally relevant instructional practices.

Table Two

Evaluating Students' Misconceptions	
N=40 Total Learners' Change (110-114)	-31
Number of respondents with no change (zero change score)	4
Number of respondents with change toward the goal (positive change score)	12
Number of respondents with change opposite goal (negative change score)	24

Uniting Different Voices into Compatible Views

It is acknowledged that the two sets of data described above are somewhat different; that notwithstanding the following conclusions were drawn from that data:

- Practitioners in urban schools believe that different instructional alternatives work best for different learners.
- Urban practitioners believe oral reports, discussions, brainstorming, debates, and problem solving to be most beneficial for high ability students.

- Urban practitioners believe drill and practice, teacher presentations and recitations to be the most appropriate strategies for low ability students.
- The degree and direction of change are influenced by the practitioners' own cognitive ability , learning personality, and prior knowledge/experience.
- By uncovering urban practitioners perspectives on contemporary educational issues and problems, change agents can better gauge when and how to replay those voices.

As the liaison between the urban school and university faculty, the researcher experienced feelings of bewilderment while simultaneously listening to urban practitioners voices and attempting to negotiate a WIN-WIN partnership/performance agreement. WIN/WIN partnership/performance agents are the result of principled negotiations. The essence of principled negotiations is 1) to separate the person from the problem; 2) to focus on interests rather than on positions; 3) to invent options for mutual gain; and 4) to insist on objective criteria...some external standard or principle that the stake holders can buy into. Consistent with the existing change literature, many subtle dynamics came into play when urban teachers were offered the opportunity to create a comprehensive equity agenda (AKA academic achievement plan). Moreover, earlier research on the psychology of the classroom suggests that the coercive bureaucracy in which teachers work, create a mindset in which the only control teachers can exert is behind the doors of their own classroom. The implications of this mindset was that practitionrs need to be convinced that finding their voice is both empowering and worth the risk. By attending to this mindset, teachers not only exercised voice in redefining "quality educational experiences, but also enhanced their confidence in saying "no" to time-consuming activities that failed to advance their collective visions.

Developing a Sensitivity to Learner Readiness

Another formidable obstacle to eliciting the practitioner's voices was the fact that often, even the most proactive members of the professional staff desired a child-adult relationship. This child-adult relationship was manifested in the professor's presumption that the job was to share observations, interpretations, and recommendations for future improvements. While theirs was to accept or reject what was being delivered. Just as the support of a democratic, just, economically viable and prosperous society requires active participation and critical thinking skills, exercising "voice" in the professional affairs requires adult-adult relationships between

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individuals who have found their voices. Evaluating and synthesizing information about contemporary educational issues requires not only literacy in a narrow sense, but also vast experience with critically analyzing a variety of perspectives. Moreover, it is believed that developing these intellectual habits in teachers ensures that they, in turn, will encourage students to find their own voices. In other words, by working with teachers in ways that teachers are expected to work with students, urban teachers can begin to work in harmony toward feasible solutions to contemporary educational problems.

Additionally, attempting to bring to the forefront issues that are crucially important for enhancing **all** students' opportunity to learn required thinking about the psychosocial development in middle adulthood. The psychosocial development of middle adulthood is a blend of both continuity and change, lined together with personal reflection, reassessment, and redirection. "In over our heads" is a phrase helpful in describing parctitioners reactions to their evolving roles of a restructureing school prone to assigning blame rather than solutions. This description is especially appropriate during a time when practitioners try to make sense of the continually changing demands of teaching, the shifting roles in student-teacher relationships, and the changing perspectives in the world at large, regarding racism, sexism, and classism.

At the beginning of this project, more than half of the educators viewed knowledge as facts, correct theories, and right answers. Their most nerve-wracking confusion resulted when experts disagreed. However, as multiple interpretations and diverse opinions manifested themselves more and more; as their faith in authorities and right answers was worn away, they began to accept the notion that in at least some areas, no one knows the answers, that knowledge is simply a matter of opinion. Unfortunately, from this vantage point, they then declared that **everyone** is entitled to his/her own opinion and **all** opinions are equal. Consequently, they either retreated, temporized, or escaped when asked to look at one another's instructional practices in terms of differences and deficiencies.

De Ja Vu, Again

Thus, I am currently ambivalent about the "good" I am doing by stimulating urban practitioners to exercise

their voices. Becoming informed decision-makers has neither made them happier nor resulted in a comprehensive equity agenda. Even the idealistic, motivated, extremely competent teachers are beginning to think that the problems they are trying to solve are so overwhelming and the tasks so difficult that they will never fully succeed. To make matters worse, the IPS Board of School Commissioners recently announced that they "will review each schools' annual performance objectives (academic achievement plans) and either approve or reject them. If the Board rejects a school's proposed performance objectives, the Board will establish the objectives for that school."

De ja vu, again? History demonstrates that top down interventions designed to address the persistent disparities in performance between majority and minority students, have produced disappointing results; yet, conscientious educator opposes quality and excellence as appropriate restructuring goals. The problem seems to be gaining consensus about what urban students need to know and be able to do in order to be successful in the 21st century. What is needed is a way to alter existing power relationships and organizational structures so that the practitioners will be viewed as agents of change rather than targets for change.

Transforming ineffective power relationships and organizational structures continues to be an ambitious, deliberate, developmental, and sometimes subversive undertaking. A critical first step is helping would-be collaborators distinguish between power-over and power-with perspectives. Educators with a power-over perspective seem to prefer the traditional authoritarian command and control hierarchy where the administrators think and the teachers act; consequently, they expect most of their efforts seeking ways to receive power from the administration. By way of contrast, educaters with a power-with perspective seemed to see themselves as unique, reflective practitioners who respect ideological differences; they generally made no attempt to impose their interpretations of "excellence and equity" by fiat or other subtle political, psychosocial machinations.
Urban teachers with "power-with" perspectives also reported increased confidence and competence in accommodating their students' learning needs as they learned to use the "Ways of Knowing" paradigm reflected in Figure Four.

The "Ways of Knowing" paradigm posits that individuals move through a series of fairly well-defined

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phases of intellectual development. Coupled with ancient folk wisdom that in order to be successful, a teacher needs "to start where the students are," this framework has helped urban practitioners to determine, at the outset, the level of cognitive development at which their students are functioning. Those who chose to use this framework are finding some tentative answers to the following questions:

1.) What subject-matter is best for stimulating student movement along this framework?

2.) What teaching methods or styles appropriately challenge students who think at the lowest level?

3.) How much change from one level of thinking to another can be expected in a month, a semester, or a year?

Insights and Conclusions

As a professional educator who has worked conscientiously with this urban school for over eleven semesters, I must confess that it has been a Sisyphean task at best. My overreaching goals was to create experiences that invite right/wrong thinkers to learn to appreciate multiple points of view and to construct support for their opinions. If our existing partnership were to end today, there would be little to show for our efforts. There is a very real need to identify the most promising interventions and intructionalize the to gather solid data on how those interventions actually work. For the most part, all we have now is an uneasy alliance made appealing by the carrot of funding.

Consistent with misconception research, the urban practitioners' prior knowledge greatly accelerated or retarded his or her ability to participate constructively toward the creation of a comprehensive equity agenda. Because practitioner' misconceptions are strongly held and resistant to change, the desired degree and direction of change is more likely to result from using reflective discussions which focus on issues on which there is relatively weak agreement with expert opinion (See Critical Conversations task sheet Items # 1, 3, 7, 10). Finally, because urban practitioners may retreat, temporize, or escape as alternatives to transcending the narrow confines of their own race, gender, and culture, a nudge is better than a shove in these matters.

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Figure One

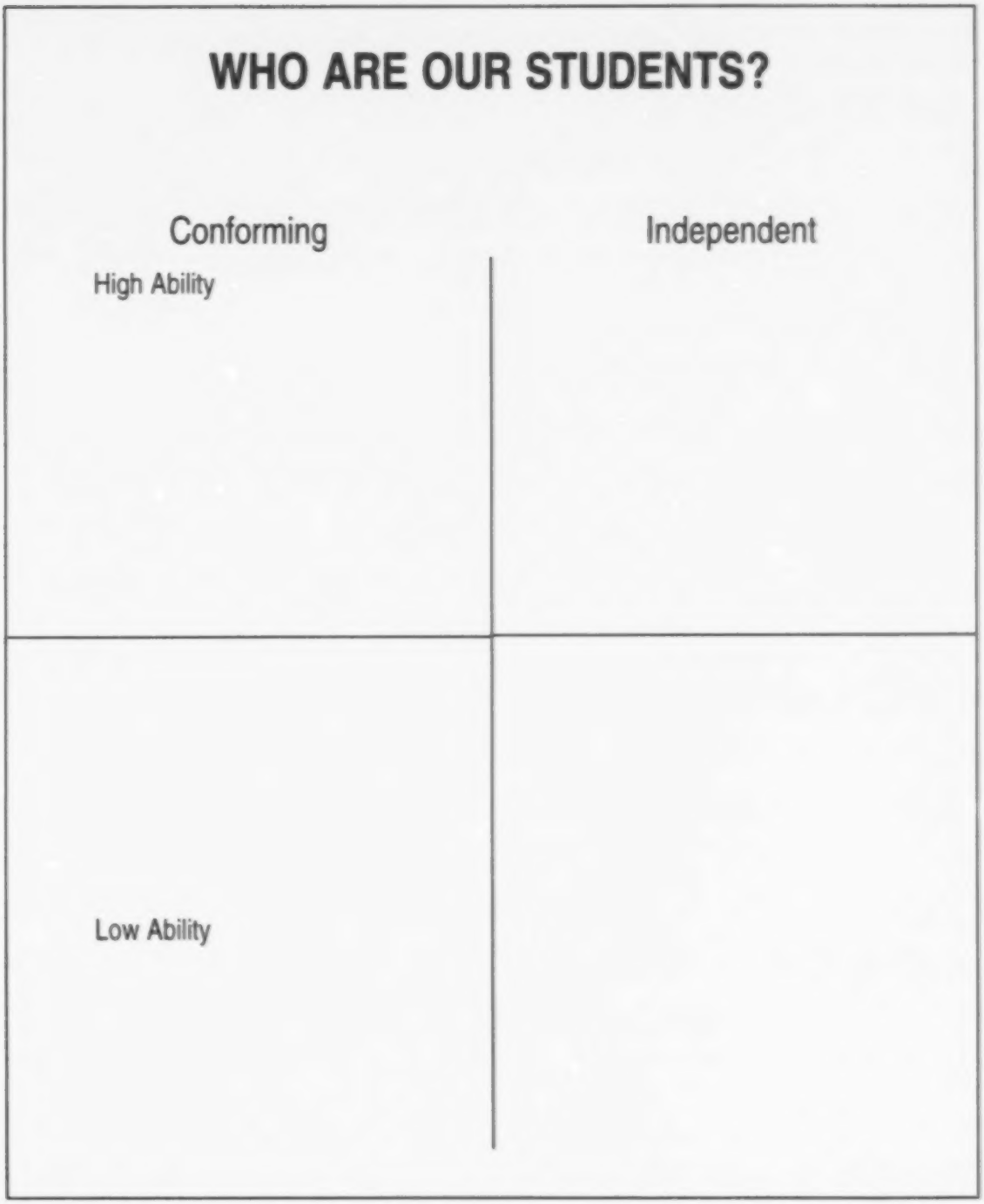

WHO ARE OUR STUDENTS?
Conforming
Independent
High Ability
Low Ability

Figure Two

Wheel of Instructional Choice

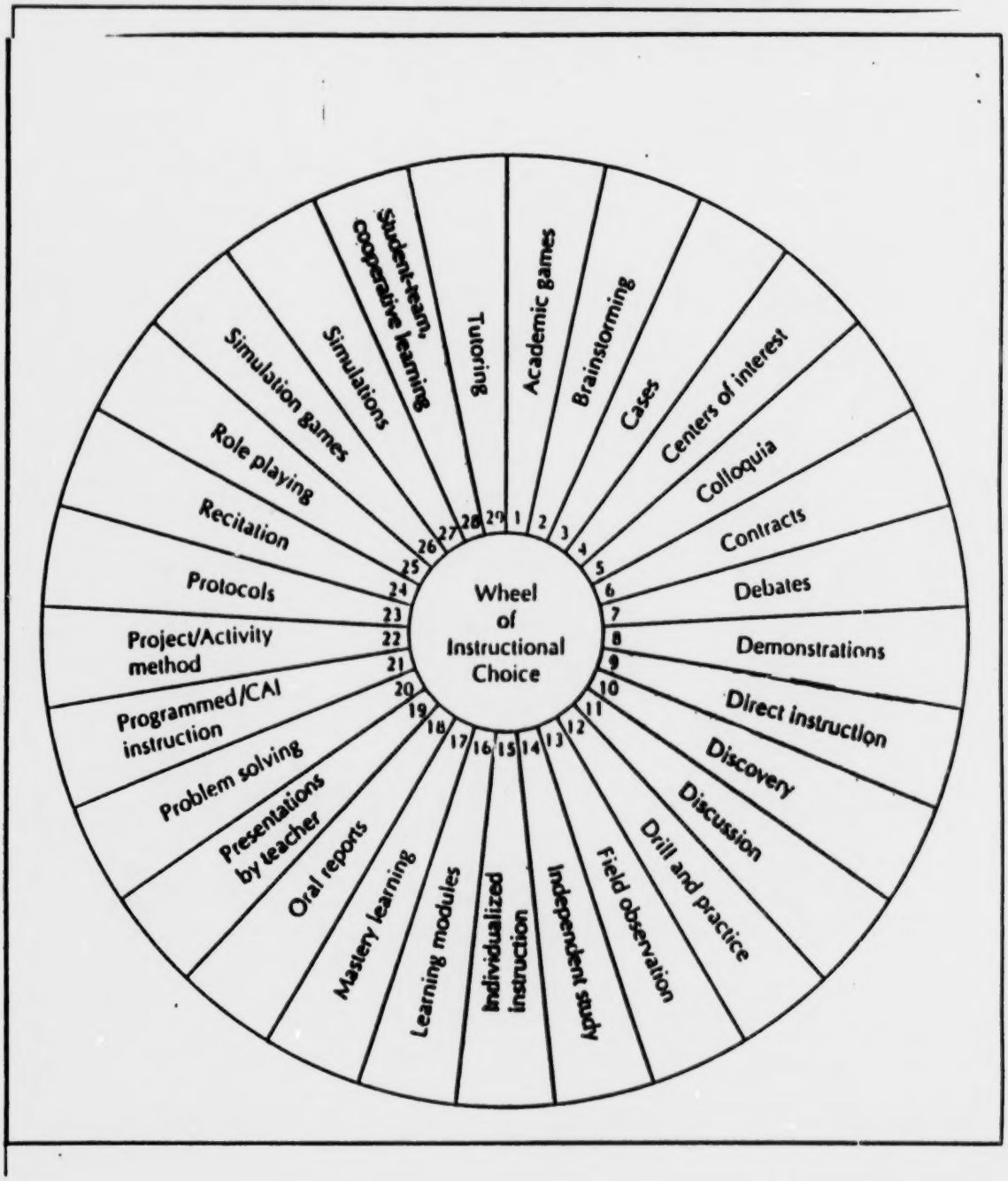


Figure Three

Critical Conversations: Identifying Your Own and Others Perspectives

During this activity, you will 1) experience the qualities of critical conversations; 2) recognize something of value in a viewpoint that is not your own; and, 3) pay attention to the consequences of adopting a particular perspective in your professional interactions.

Strongly Agree **Strongly Disagree**

1. Teaching is a special art which cannot be subjected to objective observational standards, aesthetic critique, or to a standard knowledge base.

   6 5 4 3 2 1

2. Today's schools are ineffective not only in providing a ladder out of poverty but also in providing an effective education for all children.

   6 5 4 3 2 1

3. Higher teacher salaries, more rigorous teacher education, and stricter teacher licensing will improve the quality of public schools.

   6 5 4 3 2 1

4. The lack of supervision at home, lack of family involvement in the schools and exposure to violence in the mass media are the major factors contributing to the lack of discipline in public schools.

   6 5 4 3 2 1

5. Teachers should be free to teach according to their own personalities, teaching philosophers and goals.

   6 5 4 3 2 1

6. The economic future of the United States depends mainly on the skills of the front line work force, the people whose jobs will not require a baccalaureate degree.

   6 5 4 3 2 1

7. Among the several literacies that schools purport to develop civic, computer, content, cultural workplace, etc. civic literacy is the least visible.

   6 5 4 3 2 1

8. All Americans should be free to be whatever they choose, ie Democrat or Republican, conservative or liberal, radical or moderate, or whatever combination of these and other ideologies or lifestyles one cares to identify.

   6 5 4 3 2 1

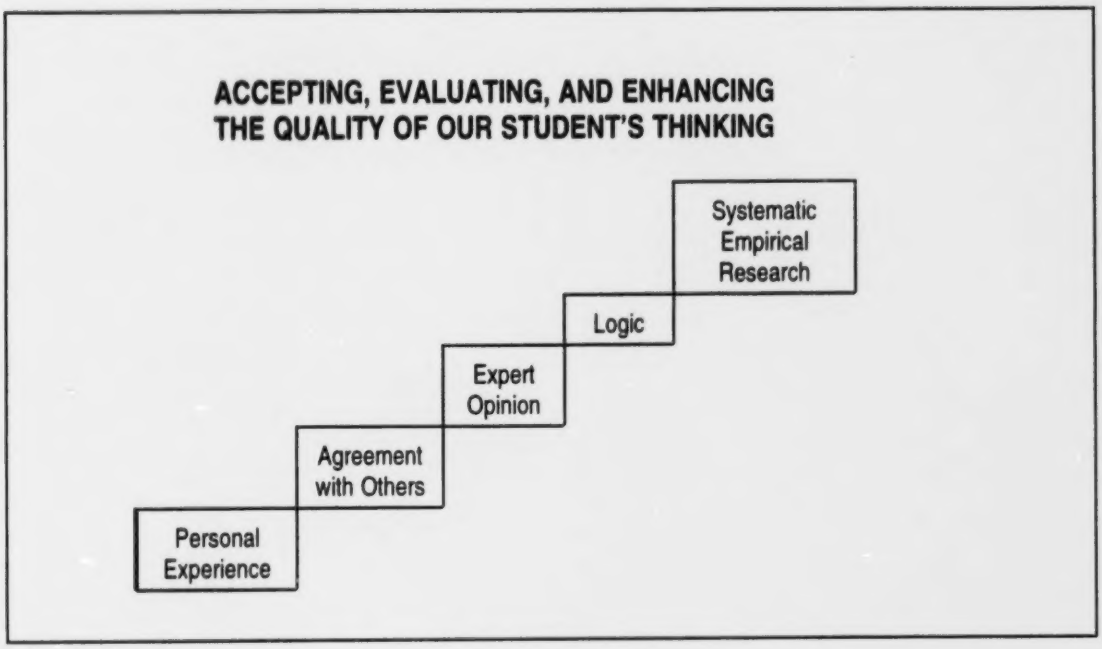
9. Traditional assessment, grading, and student recognition practices are responsible for the anti-academic norms and low levels of student effort that pervade American schools.

   6 5 4 3 2 1

10. When a child does not learn, it is premature to blame the child because more often than not the failure lies with the educator.

    6 5 4 3 2 1

Figure 4


ACCEPTING, EVALUATING, AND ENHANCING
THE QUALITY OF OUR STUDENT'S THINKING
Systematic
Empirical
Research
Logic
Expert
Opinion
Agreement
with Others
Personal
Experience